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SUBJECT: Deteriorating Security in Farah Province

Summary  
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¶1. Farah's security environment has deteriorated steadily over the past 20 months, accompanied by the disappearance of Afghan government presence in outlying districts. Despite the efforts of Governor Roohul Amin, current material and human resources available to the province are inadequate to redress the situation. Problems are compounded by corruption in the Afghan National Police (ANP) and line ministries. Governance and development programs to be introduced through the anticipated Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) in the province would be a step in the right direction, but much more is needed to prevent the declining situation in this part of the so-called "stable West" from deteriorating further.

Poppy, Crime and Insurgency - a Bad Mix  
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¶2. With the exception of the four western districts along the border with Iran, all of Farah's districts face serious security challenges. Insurgent-manned roadblocks are widespread, presenting a serious impediment to free movement. The most problematic districts are those in the eastern part of the province bordering the Ring Road, particularly those near Delaram in far northern Nimruz province. In Delaram district itself, there is a Taliban shadow government with its own district chief and staff. Gulistan, just north of Delaram, is known for its abundant opium cultivation and strong Taliban presence. Further west and also bordering Delaram, Bakwa district, also a significant poppy-growing area, had no Afghan government officials in residence until six months ago, leaving the area under Taliban control. Even now, Bakwa resembles a war zone, with shops in the bazaar closed and the district government headquarters and medical clinic both destroyed by the Taliban. Although these structures are being rebuilt, the district still has no functioning schools except in a few remote areas. (During recent voter registration, Bakwa had a dismally low turnout, compared to other districts in Farah.)

¶3. Bala Buluk, through which runs the highway connecting provincial capital Farah city to the Ring Road, is another Taliban stronghold. Shewan, located along the connector road, remains under Taliban control and is the site of regular traffic disruptions. Not incidentally, this is one of the areas of the most intensive poppy cultivation in Farah; Bakwa district cultivate the most poppy in the province. To the west and north of Bala Buluk, Khaks-e Safid district has a 120 year old, well-developed irrigation system which has been defunct for the past 20 years. Fed by nearby Farah Rud River, the district could be a prime target for government-funded infrastructure development projects to restore and rebuild the irrigation system, returning prosperity to the area. However, the active Taliban presence in the area has halted approval by GIROA and Coalition Forces for all development projects. Even without

security concerns, another impediment hinders progress in the district -- the dominance of a number of family clans. Until they are willing to support projects that benefit the entire population, the immediate future in Khaks-e Safid will remain uncertain. On the positive side, the recent worldwide rise in grain prices has encouraged most former poppy farmers in the district to switch to cultivating wheat.

¶4. In the face of Farah's poor security climate, many NGOs have ceased operations in the province and withdrawn to the relative safety of Herat province. UNAMA too closed its provincial office in Farah city. On that front, at least, an improvement seems to be in the offing. Last month a UNAMA official visited Farah city and began working on arrangements to re-establish operations in the city. When fully up and running, the office is expected to have a staff of two expatriates and nine Afghans. Reopening the office might allow UNAMA finally to address Independent Directorate for Local Governance's (IDLG) demand that UNAMA join it in declaring Bala Buluk a critical or tipping district and focus its efforts there. To date, UNAMA has steadfastly declined, citing its lack of personnel in the areas.

First- and Second-Tier Taliban  
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¶5. Taliban insurgents are mingled with, and indistinguishable from, other residents. It is not unusual for Pashtun families to have at least one family member serving (at least part-time) with the Taliban. Insurgents have a highly-efficient intelligence gathering network. Their usual methods of communicating with their chain of command are fairly basic and not dependent on technology. The delivery of night letters is still a common way to threaten families

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who send their daughters to school. The Taliban also engender a loyalty built not only upon family, clan and tribal ties but also on fear. A person who betrays the Taliban will be tortured and killed, along with his family and friends.

¶6. Few first-tier Taliban operate within Farah province. Only Shewan village in Bala Baluk contains a powerful, well-organized and well-armed Taliban force in the province. All the same, these and other Taliban have grown in experience and audacity over the past five years. As happens elsewhere in the south, they bring in reinforcements from outside the province to mount major operations. Last November, for example, over 100 combatants lay siege to the home of the father of the provincial director of the National Directorate of Security, located just six kilometers west of Farah City. The most recent development in Taliban presence has been the re-appearance of Taliban units in the Lashe-je-wain area in western Farah province. This has been in most part due to the 3/8 Marines in the eastern districts pushing the Taliban westward.

¶7. Many other fighters commonly referred to as Taliban in Farah are common criminals, kidnappers and thieves who take advantage of the absence of law and order to conduct their operations. The governor himself reports that these criminal groups have links to more extremist Taliban groups through which they receive intelligence and guidance on conducting their own operations. They also have access to high-tech weaponry from Iran and other neighboring countries, including fused projectile RPG-29 shoulder-fired anti-tank rockets and sophisticated pressure-plate detonation devices with programmable computer chips. These weapons can be programmed to detonate under vehicles of specific weight, making it possible to target specific vehicles in a convoy, typically the lightest vehicles with the least amount of armor plating.

Governance Void  
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¶8. There is a noticeable absence of government presence in the rural districts. Previously the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) had a large staff in the outlying districts, as did the Ministries of Public Health (MoPH) and Interior (MOI). As these government employees gradually disappear through dismissal or succumbing to threats, many have remained listed on district

payrolls and their salaries continue to be paid. Locals believe these phantom salaries end up in the pockets of provincial-level directors within the ministries.

¶9. Shura members repeatedly suggest that in the case of the provincial MoPH, medical staff in remote areas often quit without warning after a few months on the job; however, their salaries continue to be paid, sometimes for years. Shura members suggest these salaries are also diverted for personal use by ministry personnel. The governor reports that MAIL runs a similar scam but on a larger scale. Not only does it maintain phantom employees, but the department continues funding entire programs even when those programs have ceased.

¶10. Governor Amin is attempting to address these problems with the tools available to him, but he has an uphill battle. He is, for example, trying to remove the corrupt MAIL director but the ministry in Kabul is resisting his efforts. The governor has ordered a member of his staff to make unannounced visits to all districts to survey which employees are working on a daily basis and determine if basic services are being provided. The governor has also played an important role in bringing a series of three-day seminars (presented by USAID implementers) to help district officials upgrade their administrative skills. The first of these series was completed on January 26 and involved 30 officials from ten districts.

ANP Woes

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¶11. The Tashkil authorizes 1,333 officers for the ANP in Farah province, although only 1,100 are available for duty. Again, locals maintain that the extra salaries are paid to the provincial police chief and his key staff. The current ANP chief is trying to rectify the problem but finds himself facing a daunting task. There are far too few police assigned to properly defend the districts. Most districts have a small force of approximately 25 men, leaving them defenseless against a large enemy force. The one exception is Bakwa district, where 75-85 ANP have been assigned.

¶12. While Kabul struggles with maintaining and building a national police force, local officials in Farah face a different problem - the cost of not having enough local control. Police chiefs in the districts do not work for, or coordinate with, district

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administrators but instead report to the provincial police chief. The result, as the district administrators see it, is that while they are looked upon as the chief governance officer in their area, they have no voice in addressing what for many locals is the most pressing issue of governance - the lack of security. Time and again they recount that ANP officials are involved in personal schemes, like setting up illegal road blocks, rather than working with the local governance chief to defend the people and government buildings against an ever-expanding criminal and insurgent presence. Further degrading local confidence in the government are stories of kidnap gangs which operate with impunity in the rural districts. Moreover, fully 60 percent of all serving ANP personnel in Farah have been identified as having an opium addiction.

Comment

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¶13. It is inaccurate to characterize Farah as part of Afghanistan's stable West. As a result of the above-mentioned scams and failure to provide governance, security or services, the Karzai government appears to have squandered much of the trust of Farah's population, especially in rural areas where most people live. This gives the Taliban and other insurgent and criminal elements a chance to fill the vacuum. Turning things around will require more than just a good governor, particularly if that governor has so few material and human resources with which to work. Straightening out the problems with the line ministry representatives will require action in Kabul. Another important step would be support from the Italians, who lead Regional Command West, for the IDLG's Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), which we understand is near agreement. If, as hoped, the pilot Afghan Public Protection Program (APPP) proves a

success in Wardak, people in Farah may welcome it for their province. Finally, the upcoming arrival of additional U.S. forces in the province's problematic southeast should change the security dynamics at least temporarily and buy more time to address underlying governance problems. It will be important to take advantage of this opportunity.

¶14. This cable has been reviewed by the PRT Farah Commander.

DELL